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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000322

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: GOVERNMENT SUPPORTS RECOMMENDATIONS
MADE BY UN RAPPORTEUR ON RELIGION

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Richard M. Miles.
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: According to the Deputy Chairman of the Council on Religious Affairs (CRA), the Government supports the recommendations of the UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom, although resolution of these issues will take time and cannot be done from outside the country. He stressed the importance for all religious groups, whether or not registered, to comply with the law. While commenting favorably about Bahai and Krishna groups, both of whom are registered, he expressed a list of reservations about Jehovah's Witnesses, not so subtly showing an antipathy for them. The Grand Mufti emphasized the distinction between elements of Turkmen tradition and culture, on the one hand, and Islam. He suggested that Turkmen people are quite tolerant of lax religious observance, but will ostracize an individual for violating cultural norms. The Mufti described a state-controlled religious education curriculum that bordered on comparative religion, and said a new generation of imams has replaced those trained earlier. The Deputy CRA Chairman responded favorably about the prospects for registration of two small Protestant religious groups. END SUMMARY.

LEGISLATION ON RELIGION: TURKMENISTAN STARTED FROM SCRATCH

¶2. (SBU) On March 10, the Charge met with Council on Religious Affairs (CRA) Chairman, Charygeldi Seryayev, Grand Mufti, Rowshen Allaberdiyev, and CRA Deputy Chairman, Nury Gurbanov. Gurbanov provided an overview of the history of legislation regarding religion in Turkmenistan. He asserted that, in Turkmenistan, "the rights of a person are viewed as the essence of life, and religious freedom is included among those human rights." He described a dramatic shift in Government policy at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, noting that Turkmenistan developed its first law on religion in 1990 while still a Soviet Republic. Following independence in 1991, a law on religious affairs was adopted. According to a subsequent revision in 1994, the CRA was established. The CRA coordinates religious issues involving the Government, provides expertise in evaluating religious issues, and exercises control over religious organizations.

¶3. (SBU) Gurbanov noted that President Berdimuhamedov has

done a lot to enhance the right of religious freedom. In the area of legislation, the President strictly demands that all legislation correspond to the norms of international law and practice. Gurbanov also pointed out that the new Constitution requires the improvement of all legislation in the human rights and religious freedom areas. He expressed the view that the people of every country have their own mentality, and Turkmenistan is no exception. The CRA studies international law and practice and, in exchanging opinions on religion with those from other countries, tries to understand their experience.

AGREE WITH UN RAPPORTEUR RECOMMENDATIONS ... BUT NEED TIME

14. (SBU) Concerning the recommendations of UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion, Asma Jahangir, following her September 2008 visit to Turkmenistan, Gurbanov said the Government views her recommendations positively and approves them. He said the issues would be resolved "with time," but that there are differences in every country that cannot be resolved from outside. He mentioned that President Berdimuhamedov met with Jahangir and gave instructions that there should be no obstacles to her work during her visit.

CRITIQUE OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

15. (SBU) On the subject of Jehovah's Witnesses, Gurbanov began by saying that while they are a small group, they seem to think they count for a lot and exaggerate their numbers, although he was not sure what purpose that served. It was

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his "profound belief" that in every religion, family is considered holy. He said the Jehovah's Witnesses make mistakes about Turkmen mentality and destroy the family. They recruit a wife and her husband is not happy, or they invite children to become Jehovah's Witnesses without their parents' permission. According to Gurbanov, these conflicts involve not only ethnic Turkmen, but also Russians and adherents of other religions. He mentioned that the CRA receives petitions with people's complaints about such activities. He was surprised how the Jehovah's Witnesses have reached even the most distant villages. Gurbanov also mentioned Bahai and Krishna groups, which have been registered. Ashgabat was the location of the first Bahai church, established in the late nineteenth century by Bahai refugees from present-day Iran. The church was destroyed in the 1948 earthquake and replaced with a monument to Turkmen poet Magtumguly.

16. (C) Gurbanov expressed that view that all religious groups, registered or not, should respect the laws of the country "because it is the country that feeds them." He said if the Government registered the Jehovah's Witnesses, people would not understand because the Jehovah's Witnesses "do not respect Turkmenistan's laws." He noted disapprovingly that the Jehovah's Witnesses refuse blood transfusions, adding that, in his personal opinion, the Government cannot register that group. The Charge explained some of the challenges that Jehovah's Witnesses faced historically in the United States in attempting to practice their religion, citing refusal to pledge allegiance to the flag and military service. Nonetheless, over time U.S. courts resolved these issues in a manner that respected religious convictions. Gurbanov said the United States has had 250 years to resolve these issues, while Turkmenistan is still very young as a nation.

TURKMENISTAN: NEED TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN CULTURE AND RELIGION

17. (SBU) Mufti Rowshen Allaberdiyev shared his views on the particular features of Islam in Turkmenistan, stressing the importance of distinguishing between the customs and traditions of the Turkmen people, on the one hand, and Islam on the other, in order to avoid misunderstandings. In the Arab world, cultural practices and religion are integrated.

This is not the case in Turkmenistan. For example, among Turkmen, the third, seventh and fortieth days following a death are commemorated, but this practice is cultural, not religious. Many people in Turkmenistan do not read prayers, but are not ostracized. However, if a person does not observe the appropriate days following a death, that person would be ostracized.

18. (SBU) The Mufti said that clergy in Turkmenistan are taught to respect all other religious communities. If someone publicly says that they do not respect another religion, that person will be ostracized. According to the Mufti, Muhammed taught that if another religion does not create an obstacle for Islam, then co-existence is fine. In the Koran, the Mufti noted that Allah had created men and women and separated them into different nationalities and religions in order for them "to visit and become friends." The Mufti explained the Turkmen perspective on Islam, that if Turkmen traditions are not respected, then people will not be happy. He noted that the Turkmen population is predominantly Muslim, and that their respect for Islam can be observed by visiting a mosque on a Friday and seeing how many people attend Friday prayers.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN TURKMENISTAN

19. (SBU) Concerning the education of Islamic clergy, the Mufti said during Soviet times, the issue of institutional religion was not considered. Upon independence, Turkmen authorities chose the Turkish system as the most acceptable version. In 1994, a Religion Faculty was established at

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Turkmenistan State University. Its task was to teach not only religion, but also Turkmen customs and traditions. The imams that serve in the mosques are trained at the university. They are taught not only Islam, but also all aspects of religion in order to facilitate understanding between religious groups. The Mufti said all imams in the provinces are graduates of the university program. Previously, half the imams were from the elder generation and half were younger, but the new generation has been fully brought in during the last two years. He added that there are no madrassahs in Turkmenistan. There were madrassahs previously, but they could not find enough positions for the graduates, so the madrassahs were closed. According to the Mufti, the university meets the current need for clergy. The Mufti said there are not many requests to establish madrassahs, but if they receive more such requests, they will consider it in the future.

"NO OBSTACLES" FOR REGISTRATION OF TWO CHURCHES

10. (C) The Charge raised the cases of the Iman Yoly (Path of Faith) and Svet Zhizni (Light of Life) churches that have been trying to obtain registration. Gurbanov was instantly familiar with both groups, saying that the CRA had "helped them a lot" and that they are the "most ready" for registration. He noted that there was a bureaucratic process, but believed that there were "no obstacles." He said the Commission on Religion and Public Organizations at the Ministry of Justice now had action on the matter.

11. (C) COMMENT: CRA Chairman Seryayev attended the meeting and, while he seemed to follow the conversation with interest, he did not speak at any point, instead allowing Gurbanov to do all the talking on behalf of the CRA. Although he might have been uncomfortable speaking in Russian, the Mufti made his comments in Turkmen, which the Chairman could also have done. In speaking with contacts among the minority religious groups, Gurbanov's name is frequently mentioned as their contact, or as the source of various comments, suggesting that Gurbanov plays an active role in the functioning of the CRA. Our contacts have shared varying views on Gurbanov, with some saying he is supportive, while others suggesting that he holds personal views that are

unacceptable for an official in his position. In his conversation with the Charge, when he would be at his most "diplomatic," his comments about Jehovah's Witnesses suggested a strong antipathy. We've also been told he would refuse to accept women or invalids as church leaders. Still, his comments about the Government's approval of the Special Rapporteur's recommendations were encouraging, offered with a hint of the respect that anything UN-related seems to muster with the Turkmenistan Government. The comment about the prospects for registration of the two church groups was also encouraging, especially if their long wait and repeated submissions can finally come to a favorable end. Still, there are equally worthy groups also waiting for registration, so hopefully if and when the good news comes, there will be additional beneficiaries as well. END COMMENT.

MILES